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## THE STUDY OF FOLK-SONG IN AMERICA.

WITH the completion of the late Professor Child's monumental collection of *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*—a definitive edition, if anything of the sort can be definitive—it has seemed to many that the final returns had been gathered and the subject practically closed. But an inevitable result of the work of a great scholar is that it originates a long line of subsequent investigation. Professor Child's collection was practically definitive for certain purposes. It is the aim of this paper to suggest the importance of supplementary research for the satisfaction of certain other interests, as well as a method by which that research can be carried on.

The traditional ballad still persists in America, and to an extent undreamed of by many. At the University of Missouri, during the past year or two, the attempt has been made to record and classify such material as could be gathered from the lips of the people by students and instructors. The results have been interesting and gratifying. The body of American university students, especially of students in the state universities, is a body representative of all classes of American society. Is it not worth while to attempt a systematic search for old and vanishing folk-song in America, to be carried on by the students and under the direction of the teachers of our schools, colleges, and universities?

The Missouri collection, imperfect as it is, will give an idea of the results that may be looked for from such an investigation. Though contributions of a piece or two each have been made by many, the collection is in the main the work of four persons, each representing a different locality. In a year and a half versions have been found of eleven of the British ballads recorded in Professor Child's volumes. Some of these are not represented by American versions in Child's collection, and the others differ in various interesting ways from the American versions recorded by him. Five forms of "Barbara Allen" have come in. Of "The Demon Lover"—of which Child mentions, but failed to

recover, an early American broadside, printing only two stanzas, and those from an old Philadelphia magazine—we have two complete versions, both nearer to the British form than is Child's fragment. And all these representatives of old English balladry are known and have been preserved orally; though this is not to say that they are unknown here in print. The finding of eleven out of three hundred and five ballads, and most of those already recorded in American versions, is, to be sure, no great matter in itself; but, taken in conjunction with what Mr. Newell and Mr. Barry have printed in the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, it partly indicates the extent to which the old ballads have been preserved in this country. The finding of recognized ballads inherited from the old country is not, however, the only, nor indeed the most interesting, result of our efforts. The existence as authorless popular song of pieces that clearly go back to the Old World and to former centuries, but have not found place in collections; the formation of new ballads out of old ones by "degeneration;" the continuance of the ballad-making faculty among Americans, evidenced not only by pieces relating to the War of 1812, the fight for Texas, the Mexican War, the Argonauts of 1849, and the Civil War, but also by such ballads of homely tragedy as "Young Charlotte," "Fuller and Warren," and "McAfee's Confession," and such archaic rimed homilies as that which I have called "The Wicked Girl"—all these things are shown by what a few students have brought together here in a few months.

What has been done in Missouri is mentioned only for the light it throws on what may be expected from widespread organized research. With the interest of students aroused and directed by competent scholars throughout the Union and Canada, it is not too much to hope that in a few years—half a score at most—practically every vestige of the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* in America will be found and reduced to writing. What in the great work of Professor Child, in the gatherings of Mr. Newell and Mr. Barry, and in our Missouri collection appears sporadic and merely curious will then be seen completed—and related. With organized research, employing the services of

students from the communities, and even from the very homes, where the old ballads still live, it will soon be possible to tell not only what ballads have survived in America, but how they have survived—what changes they have undergone, how widely they are known, and what the course and manner of their transmission have been. Take, for example, "The House Carpenter" (i. e., "The Demon Lover"). Mr. Barry has found the American broadside of this, printed in New York apparently in the first half of the last century. Professor Child<sup>1</sup> printed two stanzas of this version from *Graham's Magazine* for September, 1858 (having failed to find the broadside, though he knew of its existence). Now, there are in our Missouri collection two copies of this ballad from oral tradition. They are probably similar to the broadside (of which I have seen only the two stanzas printed by Child), but are certainly by no means identical with it.<sup>2</sup> What, then, has been the history of "The House Carpenter" in America? Did some enterprising English printer introduce it in the early broadside, and are the Missouri versions, and all other versions in America, descendants of that single print? Or does the New York print mean that the piece was already familiar in America, and that the Missouri versions are probably independent of it? At present we can only guess at the answer. But when we know accurately in what parts of the country, in what variety of forms, and with what traditions of its source the piece has been preserved; when, by comparison of the ascertainable history of this with that of other pieces, we are clear as to the typical course or courses of transmission of English ballads in America—then such questions can be answered with some confidence. The only sure means of getting the needed information is co-operative organized research.

<sup>1</sup> Vol. IV, p. 361.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with the first of the stanzas printed by Child the corresponding second stanza of Missouri A:

" If you have returned from the salt briny sea  
I'm sure you are to blame,  
For I have married a house carpenter,  
And I'm sure he's a nice young man."

Observe that the "king's daughter" has disappeared entirely. Moreover, the story is not Americanized in the Missouri version as it is in the broadside. The destination of the lovers is not the banks of the Tennessee, but of "the sweet Willee." In British versions it is "Italy."

Those who hold the doctrine (more or less modified) of the "communal origin" of ballads are inclined to deny the existence of native American balladry, at least in any proper sense of the word. Ballad-making, says Professor Gummere, is "a closed account." But whatever may be one's theory of ballad formation there is already evidence, which organized research would unquestionably fill out to demonstration, of the existence in America of truly popular ballads, widely known in the land, with no more personal authorship in the minds of those that sing them than "Hickory Dickory Dock," and yet with internal evidence of an American origin. Such is "Springfield Mountain," of which Mr. Newell published a number of versions, from different states, in Vol. XIII of the *Journal of American Folk-Lore*. Another is "Young Charlotte," well known in Missouri, reported by Professor Lewis, of Chicago, as known to him in childhood (though by another name) in New Jersey, found (a fragment) by Mr. Barry in Maine, and recently communicated to me from Wisconsin. It may very likely go back to print; it may go back to a strictly personal authorship in the brain of some humble poet, but as it is known to those who sing it now it is as purely impersonal and traditional as "The House Carpenter" or "Thomas and Eleanor." And there are others in the Missouri collection that are unquestionably American in the minds of those who sing them, and just as unquestionably employ the formulas, and sometimes the typical incidents, of Old World balladry. What is the origin and what has been the history of these? What part has print played in their spread and perpetuation? These are questions that well-directed organized research should enable us to answer.

The serious eagerness of the folk-song enthusiast over the very humble material with which he busies himself sometimes calls forth a quizzical smile on the faces of his friends. In American folk-song it must be confessed that the poetic quality of "Sir Patrick Spens" or "Kempion" will for the most part be sought in vain. The study must justify itself, where justification is called for, on other grounds, and chiefly on these two; that it leads to a knowledge of the simplest elements of literary taste, and that it contributes directly to the history of civilization, to a

knowledge of social and ethical conditions, among the people where the songs are found. Sometimes these songs have a good deal of local interest by reason of specific incidents embalmed in them, but the general and final value, the wide significance that underlies the study and justifies it to culture is the light it sheds on problems of taste and of social history. If, as has been supposed, ballads both British and American are found chiefly in such communities as those of the Kentucky and Tennessee mountains, we shall draw certain inferences from that fact. If, as I incline to believe, ballads are much more evenly distributed over the United States, are nearly as frequent in the New England, middle and north central states as in the southern mountains, we shall revise our notions of the culture-media of ballads—or, perhaps of the original social character of different parts of the Union—accordingly. But we cannot expect satisfactory results from partial, isolated investigation. From whatever point of view we approach the study—that of our inheritance from the Old World, that of ballad origins, that of literary taste or of social history—our research, if it is to give a basis for reliable inference, must be systematic and practically exhaustive. If the work of collection is taken up by college students under the direction of scholars in all parts of the country, a classified body of material can in a few years be got together that will lead to reasonable certainty on many points that are now mere matter of conjecture.

Having thus attempted to set forth the results to be expected from systematic co-operation in the study of popular poetry, it remains only for me to give in outline the method I have in mind. The reason for suggesting the plan here is merely the hope that it may elicit further suggestions, may bring those interested in touch with one another, and so prepare the way for an effective organization at an early date.

I. In many of our colleges and in most of our universities there is, among the teachers, at least one who knows and cares something about folk-song. Among the students there are probably several who have direct knowledge of some traditional folk-song, and access to much more. The problem is to arouse

the interest of these students and bring their knowledge within reach of the seeking scholar. The study of ballads in literature classes may accomplish it. A public lecture on balladry, with some account of the eighteenth-century ballad revival and its significance in literary history, might, by the introduction of some of the American versions already recorded, be the electric spark to complete the circuit. At the University of Missouri the investigation was set on foot, as indeed it has been carried on, by the English Club, a student organization that has a good deal of local patriotism. By these or other means the first step is to arouse interest among the students who have access to the sources. Once aroused, it will probably soon spread to others besides the students. The work will involve some labor of correspondence.

II. Inclusion rather than exclusion should be the rule in the work of collection. Until the matter is in your hand, sometimes even then, you do not know whether it is worth anything or not. One of our most efficient collectors was inclined to apologize for sending a version of "The Jew's Garden" (i. e., "Sir Hugh"), thinking that it was merely a "funny" piece; and I myself failed to recognize in "Black Jack Daley," when it first came to hand, the "Gypsy Laddie" of Child's collection. It is easy to disregard what is worthless after you have it, but if you reject or discourage on hearsay you never know what you may have lost. Printed matter is by no means to be refused; both because the investigation is ideally a study of popular taste, in which print certainly plays nowadays a most important rôle, and because the relation of print to oral tradition is precisely one of the chief problems to be solved.

III. An essential point, of course, is that the circumstances under which any piece is found shall be recorded. Yet this is difficult to enforce. Many people that know and enjoy folk-song are shy about acknowledging the fact to strangers, or at least reluctant to have their names and antecedents set down on paper. Others do not understand the need of authentication; still others are careless. It is here particularly that the services of the directing scholar are needed. My practice is to ask contributors to give with each contribution answers to these questions:

1. Have you given it just as you found it—mistakes, meaningless words, and all?
2. Where, when, and from whom did you get it?
3. Did you take it down from singing, or from recitation, or copy it from MS?
4. Where, when, and under what circumstances did your informant learn it?
5. What do you know of the antecedents (racial stock, location, etc.) of your informant?
6. Does your informant know of the piece in print?

It is well to assure the contributor that no improper or inconsiderate use will be made of the information desired.

The director of the work will no doubt classify tentatively as his matter comes in, and will soon find what kind of folk-song has most thriven in his territory; but he will do well to destroy nothing until he has compared his results with those secured at other places.

The organization for this final comparison, recording and perhaps publishing of results, though essential to the scheme, need not be discussed at present. If the method thus far outlined meets with approval and adoption the last step in the organization will not be difficult. Inasmuch as the idea was first suggested at a meeting of the Modern Language Association,<sup>1</sup> and has as its essential feature the co-operation of college teachers throughout the land; inasmuch, also, as the constitution of the association provides for the appointment of special committees when occasion arises, it would seem that no new association would be needed to carry out the work. But it will be time enough to consider this when the work is fairly begun in the local centers, the schools, colleges and universities of America.

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<sup>1</sup> In a paper on "Folk-Song in Missouri," read by the present writer at the recent meeting of the Central Division of the Modern Language Association, in Chicago.